

Race and the American Creed

“How Segregation Came to Be”

Mr. Owens:

Hello.

Nicole:

My grandfather said I should come and talk to you.

Mr. Owens:

So you're Nicole. Your granddaddy and I go way back.

Nicole:

He said you were like an old-time storyteller. Granddad really wants me to know our story.

Mr. Owens:

Let me guess, you've had Black History Month every year since 1st grade. You know dates, places, names.

Nicole:

What I don't get is how this whole black-white thing got started.

Mr. Owens:

You mean, even though the American creed is freedom and equality...

Nicole:

Americans had slaves.

Mr. Owens:

I prefer to say “enslaved people.” It's not who we were naturally. It was imposed on us.

Chorus:

“...enacted and declared, that baptism of slaves doth not exempt them from bondage.”
“If any slave shall resist his master, his death shall not be accounted a felony.”

Nicole:

What's that?

Mr. Owens:

That's the slave codes.

Chorus:

All children, now born or hereafter to be born of such Negroes and slaves, shall be slaves...in perpetuity."

Mr. Owens:

You were property. The English colonists sat down and wrote those laws. It didn't just happen.

Nicole:

Our African ancestors were people. Why did the English think it was okay to treat them that way?

Mr. Owens:

Well, to the English, West Africans were different. We looked different, had different languages, different cultures, even different gods.

Nicole:

Well, we could change any of that except for our...

Together:

...skin color.

Mr. Owens:

And that is what the colonists used to establish themselves as superior.

Chorus:

"In memory they are equal to the whites; in reason much inferior, in imagination they are dull, tasteless."

Nicole:

"Dull, tasteless?"

Mr. Owens:

That's Thomas Jefferson.

Nicole:

He wrote the Declaration of Independence, "All men are created equal."

Mr. Owens:

He knew that slavery was unfair, but he also believed that blacks were inferior. Slaves were at the bottom of society, so he thought, it was their natural place in the world. Our natural place.

Nicole:

Benjamin Banneker wasn't "inferior in reason." He knew astronomy and there were preachers and poets.

Mr. Owens flips a penny and sets it head side up on the table.

Nicole:

Oh, I get it. That's Abraham Lincoln. We're going to talk about the Emancipation Proclamation.

Chorus:

"All persons held as slaves in said designated States and parts of States are, and henceforward shall be Free."

Nicole:

Free...and equal?

Mr. Owens:

Ending slavery was fine, but it didn't establish equality. Southern states just replaced the slave codes with "black codes."

Nicole:

"Black codes?"

Mr. Owens:

You couldn't lease your farm. Couldn't serve on a jury. Couldn't quit your job.

Nicole:

Couldn't quit your job?

Mr. Owens:

No matter how badly you were treated. See, it was hard for most whites to imagine equality. The black codes didn't last long. Soon after came Jim Crow.

Chorus:

"Separate the white and colored race. Separate railroad cars. Schools for white children and schools for Negro children." Restaurants. Separate! Housing. Separate!

Mr. Owens:

Some places you couldn't even go fishing with white people.

Chorus:

"We cannot say that a law which requires the separation of the two races is unreasonable."

Mr. Owens:

In 1896, "separate but equal" became the law of the land.

Nicole:

No "equal" for us. We had to settle for separate but not even close to equal.

Mr. Owens:

Hold on. We have been fighting for real equality for almost four hundred years. But we're where we are today because our ancestors did not "settle."

“Resistance”

SFX: gunshots, screams

SFX: gunshots, horses fleeing

Chorus:

“A great number of Negroes arose in rebellion.”

Nicole:

This stuff on slaves fighting back, I didn’t know that.

Mr. Owens:

Oh, we’ve always resisted injustice. There were some out-and-out rebellions, but there were lots of other ways to fight back.

Nicole:

Sneaking out at night?

Mr. Owens:

Not taking a whipping lying down.

Nicole:

Talking back?

Mr. Owens:

Lots of small ways. Scared them so they tightened up the laws and increased the punishments. But it still didn’t stop people from resisting. 1780. Massachusetts.

Nicole:

Yeah? So? What’s that about?

Chorus:

“Article One. All men are born free and equal.”

Mr. Owens:

Elizabeth Freeman said that slavery violated the Massachusetts Constitution. So she sued for her freedom.

Nicole:

Oh, she went to court!

SFX: gavel

Mr. Owens:

She won. And pretty soon, Massachusetts abolished slavery along with the rest of the northern states.

Nicole:

Well then, why didn't people go to court everywhere?

Mr. Owens:

In the South, we had no rights to the courts. But we could run away.

(singing) Follow the drinking gourd,

Nicole:

The Underground Railroad!

Mr. Owens:

(singing) When the sun goes down

and the first quail calls,

follow the drinking gourd.

Nicole:

Walking at night. Hiding in the daytime.

Mr. Owens:

Looking for the Big Dipper.

Nicole:

Going toward the North Star.

Mr. Owens:

North to freedom.

Nicole:

They were taking matters into their own hands, not waiting for white people to change the rules.

Chorus:

"If the hereditary bondmen would be free, they themselves must strike the blow."

Mr. Owens:

Henry Highland Garnet called for armed revolt. Shocked all those folks at the National Negro Convention.

Nicole:

Negro convention?

Mr. Owens:

Big meetings. Free African Americans, coming together to set our own agenda, without white leaders. Talk about education, self-improvement, equality.

Nicole:

Sticking together. Solidarity.

Mr. Owens:

Yeah, but until we had the vote, it was only a meeting.

Chorus:

"If the Negro knows enough to shoulder a musket and fight for the flag, he knows enough to vote."

Mr. Owens:

Did you know, after the Civil War we got the vote? We used it, too. Put a lot of our people into office. In the 1890s, they took away our vote. White politicians figured that if they couldn't control how we voted, which they couldn't, they'd take away the right. So they did.

Nicole:

I can't wait 'til I can vote. When we couldn't vote, what power did we have?

Mr. Owens:

There were times when the only weapon we had was telling the truth.

Chorus:

Pittsburgh Courier!

HOODED BAND ATTACKS MAN'S HOME

FARMER FORCED TO HIDE IN WOODS AS TERRORISTS RULE
NEW LYNCHING ON SATURDAY

Read all about it!

Mr. Owens:

African American newspapers kept the truth out there.

Chorus:

The butcheries of black men at Barnwell, South Carolina. Waycross, Georgia. Memphis, Tennessee. Flaying alive a man in Kentucky. The burning of one in Arkansas. "728 Afro-Americans lynched during the past eight years."

Mr. Owens:

Telling the truth could be dangerous. But no one was braver than Ida B. Wells. They burned her press, but she kept right on writing the truth. She helped found the NAACP, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, to try to put a stop to that terrorism.

Nicole:

Like the Negro Conventions?

Mr. Owens:

Yeah, but the NAACP had some powerful white friends too.

Radio announcer:

This program is coming to you from The Cotton Club in Harlem, New York City.

Music:

1920s jazz

Nicole:

That's cool music!

Mr. Owens:

Yeah, music, dance, writing. Expressing your thoughts and feelings could be a form of resistance as much as going to court or running away. It got people to start seeing that we were people too, people with gifts.

Nicole:

And equality?

Mr. Owens:

Things were changing. Not real fast yet, but we were starting to be heard. And they'd hear a lot more from us by and by.

"War and National Service"

SFX: muskets firing

Chorus:

"Shall we be citizens in war, and aliens in peace?"

Mr. Owens:

That's Frederick Douglass saying that if the country needed our boys to fight in the Civil War, they need to have the rights of citizens and be able to vote.

Nicole:

And even after we won the Civil War, could we vote?

Mr. Owens:

Most places, no.

Nicole:

We were segregated. Our people were lynched. Why would we ever fight again?

Mr. Owens:

Because we believed in what the country said it stood for.

Nicole:

So, when the country needs us, why can't we say, "What about equality?"

Mr. Owens:

In World War I we got the Army to commission African American officers. Seeing some smart, well-dressed, confident African American soldiers was too much for some people. Coming home, some of our boys got shot or lynched.

Music:

Taps

German crowd:

Heil! Heil!

Nicole:

America wasn't the only country that had racism.

Mr. Owens:

No, in World War II, we were fighting Nazi racism in Europe. So, back home people had to talk about how they were treating us. And not only us. In the Army, Japanese Americans were segregated too.

Nicole:

And their families were sent to "relocation centers" like prison camps. Like sons in our Army they's be on Japan's side.

Mr. Owens:

World War II was a turning point. Lots of African American firsts.

Chorus:

The first Marines. Officer candidate schools. The 614th Tank Destroyer Battalion. The 99th Pursuit Squadron. 332nd Fighter Group.

Mr. Owens:

Lots of heroes.

Nicole:

I'll bet they trained extra hard just to be considered equal.

Chorus:

Distinguished Service Cross. Distinguished Flying Cross.

Mr. Owens:

*"Hitler may rant,
Hirohito may rave,
But I'm going after freedom
If it leads to my grave."*

Nicole:

*"so this is what I want to know:
When we see Victory's glow,
Will you still let old Jim Crow
Hold me back?"*

Mr. Owens:

The *Pittsburgh Courier* newspaper said that we needed victory at home and victory abroad. The "Double V."

Chorus:

"We wage a two-pronged attack against our enslavers at home and those abroad who would enslave us. We have a stake in this fight. We are Americans, too."

Mr. Owens:

Even though our papers supported the War, they exposed discrimination in the military. Almost half a million African Americans served overseas. Our boys fought for America. But when those smart, well-dressed, confident African Americans came home...

Nicole:

Not again?

Mr. Owens:

But their lynching moved President Truman. He ordered desegregation in the military and that changed history.

Chorus:

"There shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services, without regard to race, color, religion or national origin,"

Mr. Owens:

By then we had voters in the northern cities. And voter registration drives in the southern ones. We had started to put our agenda on the political table.

Nicole:

I don't get it. I mean, President Truman was from Missouri – they used to have slavery .

Mr. Owens:

Progress in race relations had a lot to do with changing people's minds about race. We have to believe that we can change people's minds.

“Education”

Chorus:

“If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be.”

Mr. Owens:

Thomas Jefferson wanted to establish a system of common schools.

Nicole:

I don’t think it was for everyone.

Mr. Owens:

To dream of education was to dream of freedom. If we could just learn to read and write, we’d have the tools to challenge oppression. That’s why it was against the law to teach us.

Chorus:

“\$500 or six months in jail. Fine or whipping at the discretion of the court.”

Nicole:

\$500 must have been a fortune back then. How did you get to learn if it was against the law?

Mr. Owens:

You had to learn in secret.

Chorus:

“And he that stealeth a man and selleth him, he shall surely be put to death.”

Mr. Owens:

It meant so much just to learn to read the Bible. We started our own churches. A lot of our leaders came from African American churches. Long before the Civil War there were eleven African American schools in Philadelphia.

Nicole:

I know that some white abolitionists founded schools for free blacks, right?

Mr. Owens:

Right. Before abolition there were more literate African Americans than you might think. Did you know that some free blacks went to college?

Nicole:

Then after emancipation, education wasn't illegal in the South.

Mr. Owens:

Schools sprang up everywhere.

Choir:

"It was the most wonderful peace battle of the 19th century. They founded colleges, and up from the colleges shot normal schools and out from the normal schools went teachers."

Nicole:

We knew that education was important. That's what Du Bois was saying.

Mr. Owens:

Education was part of the American creed. It was the way up. You limit access to that, you limit people's prospects.

Nicole:

But it was separate.

Mr. Owens:

By about 1950, lots of people began to understand that "separate but equal" was just a cover for completely unequal.

Nicole:

Yeah but, weren't some segregated schools really good?

Mr. Owens:

Yeah, there were some excellent schools. Your granddad and I went to one. we had some great teachers. Those schools turned out some exceptional leaders. But exceptional schools were just that – the exception. I had a cousin in the South who went to school in a one room shack with no books, no plumbing.

Nicole:

No bathrooms?

Mr. Owens:

Not indoors. But segregation was not about buildings and books. It was about who we were and what we could hope for. It was so bad that a beautiful little black girl would tell you that her white doll was prettier than her black one...and nicer...and smarter.

Chorus:

We are going to insist on nonsegregation in American public education from top to bottom, from law school to kindergarten.

Mr. Owens:

Thurgood Marshall changed the tactics from trying to equalize segregated schools to trying to persuade the courts that segregate schools could never be equal.

Nicole:

But what about Chinese Americans, Mexican Americans?

Mr. Owens:

Oh, they challenged segregation. But we were the largest group and we had been pressing for full equality for a long time. The NAACP had been gathering support in a lot of cases before *Brown*. But it was the *Brown* decision.

Nicole:

You remember?

Mr. Owens:

Like it was yesterday.

Chorus:

"In the field of public education the doctrine of *separate but equal* has no place."

Mr. Owens:

That ruling was the beginning. Opened up the way to challenge all kinds of segregation. But for me, it started with education, because if you could get an education, you could do almost anything.

“Civil Rights”

Nicole:

The Court said segregated schools were unconstitutional.

Mr. Owens:

And how fast do you think it changed?

Chorus:

“With all deliberate speed...with all deliberate speed...with all deliberate speed.”

Nicole:

“With all deliberate speed.”

Mr. Owens:

Some people heard “speed.” Other people heard “deliberate,” which means “slow.”
About 100 members of Congress said “never.”

Nicole:

Never what?

Mr. Owens:

Never desegregate.

Nicole:

But the Supreme Court ruled...

Mr. Owens:

But it's one thing to rule on the law, it's another thing to put that ruling into effect. We had governors and members of Congress telling people they didn't have to obey the Court. These people took a difficult situation and made it worse, like pouring gasoline on a fire.

Nicole:

They thought the states could decide if they wanted to enforce federal court orders?
Like it was optional?

President Dwight D. Eisenhower:

Mob rule cannot be allowed to override the decisions of our courts.

Mr. Owens:

President Eisenhower sent troops to Little Rock. *Brown v. Board* had overturned the “separate but equal” ruling for schools, but we had to challenge segregation everywhere, get the issues into the courts, get the courts to overturn all of those Jim Crow segregation laws.

Nicole:

So, it wasn't that Rosa Parks just got fed up all of a sudden.

Mr. Owens:

No. She'd been active in the NAACP, trained in workshops. Montgomery was already organized. That's why the boycott worked.

Nicole:

Just don't ride the bus. Stop putting your money in the fare box. That's passive resistance.

Mr. Owens:

Non-violent resistance. After Montgomery, instead of there being a single Supreme Court ruling, *Brown v. Board*, now there was a nationwide movement. All kinds of people...

Nicole:

Sit-ins...

Mr. Owens:

Freedom riders.

Nicole:

Voter registration drives.

Mr. Owens: It worked. The Court overturned one kind of segregation after another. None of it was easy, but it was happening. President Kennedy had his plate full. We had assembled an overwhelming demand for justice and he had to respond.

President John F. Kennedy:

We preach freedom around the world, and we mean it. And we cherish our freedom here at home. But are we to say to the world, and much more importantly, to each other, that this is the land of the free, except for the Negroes. That we have no second-class citizens, except Negroes; that we have no class or caste system, no ghettos, no master

race, except with respect to the Negroes? Now the time has come for this nation to fulfill its promise.

Mr. Owens:

What made the Civil Rights Bill really important was that it put federal enforcement power behind the list of rights. I'll never forget marching to support that bill.

Nicole:

What was it really like?

Mr. Owens:

I couldn't believe my eyes. We got all kinds of people – old and young – to come out and demand equal rights. When President Kennedy was assassinated, it seemed like we'd lost a powerful friend.

Nicole:

But the Civil Rights Bill still passed.

Mr. Owens:

President Lyndon Baines Johnson, a southerner. He took up the case of civil rights in public, and behind the scenes. Got the Congress on board, one vote at a time.

President Lyndon Baines Johnson:

Now we just can't wait until it's too late to pass a bill...

...and I've got to pass taxes and civil rights or I quit...

...you think you can get the votes?

...you had about 95 No's didn't you? And you had about 140 Yes's?

...I just told them that they either had to have two members from the Party of Lincoln for civil rights, or...

...I hope you'll talk to every Texan and tell them how much this means...

Nicole:

A lot of work.

Mr. Owens:

Freedom takes work. Equality takes work. Democracy takes work, always has. But the Brown decision has brought us a lot closer to living the American creed. Freedom...

Nicole:

...and equality.